



Must-read, must-watch books and movies about Lab history

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Recommendations for this time of social distancing, from the National Security Research Center

Social distancing has many of us turning even more to our streaming services and e-bookshelves in our free time. But if you're looking for something even more compelling than "Tiger King," staff members from the National Security Research Center (the Lab's classified library) have some recommendations for you.

NSRC Director Riz Ali and Senior Historian Alan Carr (pictured above) share their top picks of books and movies on Los Alamos and atomic bomb history.

Good reads list

American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer, by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin

A Pulitzer Prize-winning biography that examines the life of one of the most iconic scientists of all time and how he led the effort to build the first atomic bomb.

Carr says: "I often refer to this book as, 'the everything you wanted to know about Oppenheimer and so much more' biography." book cover

The General and the Genius: Groves and Oppenheimer — The Unlikely Partnership That Built the Atom Bomb, by James Kunetka

The story of how two extraordinary, yet opposite in nearly every way, men partnered to create the world's first nuclear weapons and help end World War II.

Carr says: "This is the first book-length study of the Groves-Oppenheimer partnership and it's fascinating. The author, who was a visiting scientist at the Lab years ago, did a nice job."

"Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!": Adventures of a Curious Character, by Richard Feynman, et al.

A book of eccentric anecdotes from Feynman, a Manhattan Project physicist and Nobel Laureate, including trading ideas on atomic physics with Einstein and cracking the uncrackable safes with the most deeply held nuclear secrets.

Ali says: "This is the funniest autobiography I have ever read. A side note: the NSRC has Feynman's classified Lab notebook. I didn't understand any of the scientific things he wrote in there, but I noticed that his handwriting was incredibly neat."

How to Photograph an Atomic Bomb, by Peter Kuran

A compilation of photos and technical details about the stories and techniques behind the photography of the bomb, including newly declassified pictures from U.S. atomic weapons tests.

Ali says: "This book offers insight on how early nuclear photographers learned their craft through technical prowess and ingenuity, as well as trial and error. The author is now collaborating with LANL's Senior Historian Alan Carr on a book about the history of above ground nuclear testing, which the NSRC will publish next year."

Must-watch list

Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

A satirical, comedic black-and-white movie released in 1964 about a U.S. Air Force general who orders his bombers to destroy the USSR.

Carr says: "Yes, it's fiction, though some senior government officials have said the premise was plausible and the movie prompted the development of some of the nuclear weapons use-control measures later implemented."

The First 25 Years, A Documentary on Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory

In this film — made shortly after our second director, Norris Bradbury, retired in 1970 — he guides viewers through 25 years of Lab history. This 30-minute film on the Lab's early years was digitized by the NSRC and can be watched on [YouTube](#).

Ali says: "This documentary offers a real step back in time — both at the Lab and the town of Los Alamos — and a great first-person account straight from Bradbury."

Trinity and Beyond: The Atomic Bomb Movie

Narrated by William Shatner, this documentary was released 1995 and follows the development of nuclear weapons from their inception through the first Chinese atomic bomb test.

Carr says: “Peter Kuran, who made the film, won an Academy Award for developing film preservation techniques. He was also a lead animator for the original Star Wars films and is a consultant to the NSRC.”

Trinity test films 1-4

This hour-long video features footage without sound of the Trinity test — the world’s first detonation of an atomic bomb — on July 16, 1945. The Trinity footage was digitized by the NSRC and can be watched on [YouTube](#).

Ali says: “It’s incredible to have this footage surrounding the moment that the world entered into the nuclear age — what Trinity test director Kenneth Bainbridge described as ‘a foul and awesome display.’”

The Flavius Factor and Trust, But Verify

These 30-minute documentaries were narrated in the ‘80s by Academy Award-winning actor and World War II veteran Charlton Heston. Flavius is a programmatic overview of the Lab and Trust is about the collaboration between American and Soviet scientists. Both were digitized by the NSRC; [Flavius](#) and [Trust](#) can be watched on YouTube.

Carr says: “Interestingly, Heston received his security clearance to work on a series of classified films at LANL. As a veteran, he was happy to come to Los Alamos for these projects and wouldn’t accept payment for the work. The short documentaries have since been declassified and are publicly available.”

Plutonium metal preparation and plutonium disk fabrication videos

These black-and-white, 10-minute videos show [plutonium metal preparation and plutonium disk fabrication](#), respectively, at what was then Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory. Both were digitized by the NSRC.

Ali says: “I like watching videos like these because it reminds me just how important the preservation of historic materials is to the Lab and our mission. If it weren’t for digitization efforts, footage like this would no longer exist.”

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